

A Success Story

Rocky Fork One Step Closer To Public Legacy

Erwin, TN – Tennessee’s gateway to the Southern Appalachian Mountains – the 9,624-acre property known as Rocky Fork – is now one step closer to being protected, with the property’s acquisition by The Conservation Fund and the USDA Forest Service from New Forestry, LLC.

As part of the overall acquisition, The Conservation Fund acquired 7,387 acres, which the organization will temporarily hold as it raises money to transfer this portion of the property to the state of Tennessee and the U.S. Forest Service for permanent ownership and management. The U.S. Forest Service acquired an additional 2,237 acres of the Rocky Fork tract, which is now part of the Cherokee National Forest.

Located along the Tennessee-North Carolina border in Unicoi and Greene counties, the privately-owned Rocky Fork tract has been open to Tennesseans and visitors who hike, hunt, fish and enjoy the great outdoors. As this recreation destination became positioned for sale, a broad-based coalition of local, state and federal leaders sprang into action to save it because of the property’s natural resource value and importance to the Appalachian National Scenic Trail. The U.S. Forest Service ranked Rocky Fork as its top acquisition priority in the country.

“Rocky Fork is a Southern Appalachian gem and truly is an asset to local communities and national forest visitors,” said Tom Speaks, forest supervisor of Cherokee National Forest. “Generations of people have been using this land and we’re proud to be a part of the effort to make sure that future generations will have that same opportunity.”

The Tennessee congressional delegation, including Sen. Lamar Alexander, Sen. Bob Corker and Rep. David Davis, advanced this significant conservation project by securing Land and Water Conservation Fund dollars for the U.S. Forest Service’s acquisition of Rocky Fork. In addition, they have worked closely with key local and state leaders and Sen. Richard Burr, Rep. Heath Shuler, Rep. David Price and others in neighboring North Carolina, creating a bipartisan, bi-state delegation that has long supported a

balanced approach for natural resource conservation and economic development in eastern Tennessee and western North Carolina.

“The State of Tennessee has been very supportive of the efforts to protect Rocky Fork, providing a major grant from the Tennessee Heritage Conservation Trust Fund to aid the purchase of this spectacular property,” said Commissioner Jim Fyke of the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation. “We hope to remain engaged in this project to assure that all citizens of Tennessee can continue to use and enjoy this outstanding land.”

With its focus on the community, the Fund has partnered with local leaders to seek diverse economic benefits in conserving Rocky Fork. The Fund is interested in opening discussions concerning possible land exchange opportunities, in which the U.S. Forest Service could take ownership of additional Rocky Fork property by, in part, releasing some of its other local property deemed less strategic for management back into private ownership. The Fund also has worked with a team of local leaders interested in increasing Rocky Fork’s and the region’s importance as a gateway to the Southern Appalachian Mountains in Tennessee and North Carolina.

“We’ve made a commitment to this community – that together, we will forge a conservation solution that enhances the local environment and economy,” says Rex Boner, vice president and southeast representative for The Conservation Fund. “Even as we celebrate this milestone, our work continues. Rocky Fork is an important part of the heritage of Tennessee and we’re receiving widespread support not just in the state, but also in the region and nationwide. We need a continued coordinated effort across multiple levels of government to secure funding so that Rocky Fork can be fully protected for future generations.”

Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy and the Appalachian Trail Conservancy are leading critical local conservation efforts, rallying community support and raising public and private funds.

“Acquisition of the Rocky Fork tract has been a goal of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) since the Appalachian Trail (A.T.) received federal recognition as the nation’s first national scenic trail more than 40 years ago,” said ATC Executive Director David Startzell. That legislation—the 1968 National Trails System Act—also launched one of the most

ambitious park-related land-acquisition programs in U.S. history that has culminated in a nearly continuous publicly owned “greenway” surrounding the legendary footpath—a 2,176-mile trail extending from Maine to Georgia. About 1.5 miles of the A.T. crosses or borders the property, representing almost 20 percent of the trail right-of-way remaining to be brought into public ownership.

“Conservation of this remarkable property not only will assure current and future visitors along this segment of the Appalachian Trail the opportunity to enjoy a premier outdoor recreation experience, it also will conserve many remarkable natural and scenic resources and will provide for continued access and use of the property by local residents and out-of-state visitors alike,” continued Startzell. “Like so many other achievements associated with the Appalachian Trail, this project could not have succeeded without a robust partnership involving a host of public- and private-sector stakeholders and with key leadership, expertise and bridge funding provided by The Conservation Fund. We remain committed to continue to work with our partners to assure full funding for this outstanding conservation project.”

By any measure, Rocky Fork is huge. Not just in acreage, but also in value to the environment, the economy and the public. Rocky Fork, named after the cool waters of the creek that runs down its center, lies within Cherokee National Forest and abuts Pisgah National Forest in North Carolina, creating a vast unfragmented haven for wildlife and protecting water quality for neighboring communities. Rocky Fork’s many resources provide a range of world-class recreational opportunities – hiking the popular Appalachian Trail; fishing the more than 16 miles of pristine blue-ribbon trout streams, including the waters of Lower Higgins Creek and Rocky Fork Creek, which harbor exceptional populations of native brook trout; and hunting game animals such as bear, turkey, deer and grouse. These recreational activities have been attracting visitors from across the country for generations, bringing revenue to the local economy.

Article by Vanessa Vaughan of The Conservation Fund